

## White-fronted Black Chat *Myrmecocichla albifrons* breeding in Ethiopia

Lieuwe J. Dijkse

The distribution of the White-fronted Black Chat in Ethiopia is confined to the western highlands and the Rift Valley, where it is an uncommon bird in short grass acacia savanna up to 2,000 m. The race *albifrons* occurs in the north and the race *pachyrhyncha* in the south. There are no breeding records<sup>2</sup>.

The type specimen was described from Tembien in Tigray Province in northern Ethiopia. The town of Abi Adi is the administrative centre of Tembien. In spring 1995 while carrying out research on the breeding biology of the Brown-tailed Rock-chat *Cercomela scotocerca* near the town, I also found the White-fronted Black Chat to be a common bird.

Abi Adi (13°37'N, 39°00'E) lies at an altitude of 1,800 m, between the capital of Tigray, Makele (50 km to the east) and the Simien Mountains (48 km to the south-west). East of Abi Adi the mountains rise steeply to over 2,500 m. West of the town the landscape consists of often steep stony hills, intersected by many rivers, flowing from the highlands to the Takezze River to the west. Most of the rivers are dry for much of the year. In some of the larger ones like the Tankwa River some flowing water or pools remain throughout the year. Wherever possible the hillsides are in agricultural use, producing one crop after the rainy season (June-September). The area is heavily eroded. Goats, sheep and cattle graze the areas where ploughing is impossible, and these areas often support bushes and acacia trees.

During my research in March and April 1995 I spent 3–4 mornings a week in an area, along the river bed, just west of Abi Adi. During these visits the often very confiding White-fronted Black Chats were always seen and breeding territories were easily detected from the birds clear and far-reaching song given from the tops of bushes or trees. In an area of c75–100 ha five distinct territories could be identified along with six territories of Brown-tailed Rock Chat. The males sang from different song posts through the territories. Interaction between neighbouring males was regularly observed. No further indications of breeding

were noted until 26 April when a pair was observed collecting food and carrying it to the other side of the river bed.

A nest was subsequently found under a stone on a one metre high vertical section of the river bank. From a distance three well-developed pullus could be seen reaching out of the nest as the adults approached with food. The pullus were all black with some small yellow subterminal spots particularly on the breast, shoulders and back and to a lesser degree on the head and wing-coverts. They were photographed and ringed (Nairobi x 83135–83137). While the pullus were being ringed the adults remained close by and were very agitated uttering a rapidly repeated *tweet-lee, tweet-lee*. A sharp *tjack-tjack* was also heard on one occasion. These vocalisations are not mentioned by Keith, Urban & Fry<sup>1</sup>. A few days later the young had fledged but they remained in the vicinity of the nest for a further week. When I examined the remains of the nest I discovered that it mainly consisted of tiny twigs and stalks of plants, lined with the roots of small plants, and also some curls of human hair.



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Finally it should be noted that the text on White-fronted Black Chat in Keith, Urban & Fry<sup>2</sup> contains a discrepancy concerning the distribution in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Under 'Range and Status' it is stated that there are probably two separate populations, one in the lowlands of SW Ethiopia and the other in Eritrea. The distribution map reflects these comments and consequently excludes the type-locality. However within the 'Description' section the range of the nominate race is described as 'N Ethiopia south to Yavello' yet Yavello lies only about 100 km from the Kenyan border! With the nominate race being restricted to Ethiopia and Eritrea this appears to be the first docu-

mented breeding record of the nominate race and is also the first documented breeding record for Ethiopia! ☺

## References

1. Keith, S., Urban, E.K. and Fry, C.H. (eds) 1992. *The Birds of Africa*. Vol IV. London: Academic Press.
2. Urban, E.K. and Brown, L.H. 1971. *A Checklist of the Birds of Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: Haile Sellassie I University Press.

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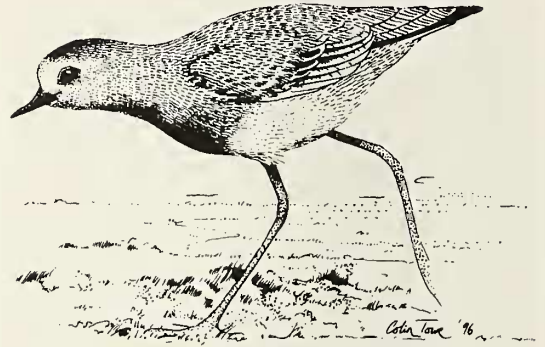
# White-tailed Plover *Vanellus leucurus*, new for Ethiopia

Lieuwe Dijkse

The White-tailed Plover winters in north-east Africa, mostly in Egypt and Sudan along the coasts of the Red Sea and along the White and Blue Nile rivers, their tributaries and the River Takezze. It has not previously been recorded in Ethiopia<sup>1</sup>.

On 17 October 1994, my brother, Adriaan Dijkse (AJD) and I together with our spouses were birding a small unused reservoir in the outskirts of Makele (13°30'N 39°29'E) the capital of Tigray Province in northern Ethiopia when we discovered a White-tailed Plover resting on the mud at the water's edge. We are both familiar with the species, AJD on its Asian breeding grounds and I with wintering birds in Iraq. Coincidentally in 1976 I also observed the first White-tailed Plover in The Netherlands. AJD took some pictures of the bird which was easily identified by its unmarked pale greyish-brown appearance and long yellow legs. Later it flew to the other side of the lake and back at which point the distinctive wing-pattern, with a white patch bordered by black over the lesser coverts, and the very long legs trailing well beyond the completely white tail were clearly seen. No other plover shows these features.

The bird was still present during my next visit to the site on 2 November 1994 but could not be found during the midwinter count in January 1995. However another White-tailed Plover was seen at a reservoir near Tessanie in Eritrea by Jim Vaughan (John Atkins, pers comm) during the winter of 1994/95. As birding activity in Eritrea and Ethiopia is increasing rapidly it can be expected that the species will be recorded regularly in the future. ☺



White-tailed Plover *Vanellus leucurus*  
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## Reference

1. Urban, E.K., Fry, C.H. and Keith, S. (eds) 1986. *The Birds of Africa*. Vol II. London: Academic Press.

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## Postscript

Only an hour after submitting this article on 5 February 1996 Lieuwe visited the reservoir again and recorded the same or another White-tailed Plover 15 months after the original record.

Editorial team